

Japanese Mass Media Buries Self-Immolation Protest Over Abe Government's Constitutional Coup 日本のマスメディア、安倍政権による憲法クーデターへの焼身行為抗議を葬り去る

Jeff Kingston, Asano Ken'ichi

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

Jeff Kingston and Asano Ken'ichi

Jeff Kingston and Asano Ken'ichi comment on a self-immolation protest against the Abe government's collective self-defense policy.

The reverberations of the act of self-immolation next to Shinjuku Station on June 29, 2014 seem akin to the sound of one hand clapping. Japan's mass media reliably jumps all over any sensational story, but not this one. While not ignored, it was certainly not pursued, as the story of a man reciting an anti-war poem by Yosano Akiko, a national legend, before igniting himself in front of throngs on a Sunday afternoon at Tokyo's most crowded commuter station somehow failed to gain traction. It was a remarkable political statement without precedent in the Japan I have lived in since 1987 making the negligible coverage all the more newsworthy.

The man was protesting Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's gambit to reinterpret Article 9 of the constitution to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense (CSD). The mere fact that he invoked the celebrated poet in his indictment of Abe's constitutional putsch just before setting himself on fire would seemingly merit some reflection, yet this incident quickly slipped off the media radar screen. Odd, but then again I recall that the protests against PM Koizumi Junichiro dispatching troops to Iraq back in 2004 were largely ignored by the media and in mid-September 2011 a massive demonstration against nuclear power right across the street from NHK never had a chance against the local fireworks story; it was completely ignored.



Police and firefighters investigate the site of the attempted suicide. Kyodo News photo

Abe's putsch involves bypassing constitutional procedures to revise the Constitution because he lacks sufficient support to win two-thirds approval in both houses of the Diet and a majority in a national referendum. Instead, Abe achieved by diktat what he could not gain democratically, asserting a Cabinet reinterpretation of Article 9 that allows for collective self-defense (CSD). Is this what Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro meant last summer when he suggested it was important to learn from the sly manner of the Nazis when they overturned the Weimar Constitution? Regardless, on July 1, 2014, with the stroke of a pen Japan's postwar pacifist order was overturned, marking a major shift in national defense policy in the absence of Constitutional amendment, popular support, or even significant public discussion.

My own direct encounter with media coverage came on July 1st, the day that Abe announced and defended his decision to gut Article 9 and thereby trample on this iconic cornerstone of the Peace Constitution, one that has become intrinsic to Japanese national identity and stands nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. NHK sent a crew to interview me that afternoon and the correspondent spent a half hour trying to elicit some favorable comment from me to no avail. Before we began taping I mentioned the self-immolation and he acknowledged that he knew nothing about it. I told him that it was all over social media and reported in international media, offering to show him, but he was not interested at all. When he left I wondered what 30-second sound bite NHK would end up using. In the early evening NHK aired the interview immediately after Abe gave a vigorous defense of his decision. I was pleasantly surprised that NHK ran my comment that the Japanese view Abe as a thief in the night, sneaking in the backdoor to steal the heart and soul of the

constitution, undemocratically revising the constitution by sidestepping constitutionally mandated procedures. Judging from the reaction of my neighbors I met over the next few days, slamming the premier was popular. Early the next morning I went to empty my garbage and the two eighty-something ladies sitting on their porch across the street, members of Soka Gakkai and die hard supporters of New Komeito, gave me a standing ovation as I placed my burnable garbage in the communal bin. I assumed they were acknowledging that it was an exceptionally deft placement and that they wanted to curry favor with me as that week I was the gomitoban (neighborhood garbage czar), but they explained that they were angry at their party leaders for caving into Abe and thus were happy to hear me skewer him.

My takeaway from the NHK encounter is that legitimate worries about state censorship—the special secrets act was passed last December—and the management of news by the kisha clubs (press clubs), should not distract us from the very real problem of ignorance, apathy and complacency among Japanese journalists. An NHK reporter may not be a fair example because its employees are more like bureaucrats and functionaries, and are not trained or encouraged to develop as investigative journalists. But because the public views NHK as a more reliable source of news than its commercial competitors, it merits scrutiny.

After I wrote about my NHK encounter various people contacted me to explain why NHK had ignored the self-immolation story. Many agreed that NHK is a pseudo news organization packed with “perfunctories” who shirk and slink away at the first sign of controversy or need for investigative journalism. Others said the problem has become more profound under new

top management that makes clear its support for Abe's conservative agenda and intolerance for dissent or criticism. The new bosses don't actually have to issue directives because middle management underlings convey the message—degenerating into hallway shouting matches I hear - fostering a chilling atmosphere that undermines journalistic standards. The chill that descends from above encourages self-censorship and discourages reporting that might be construed as negative towards Abe. Thus an incident as politically sensitive as a self-immolation protest against one of Abe's signature policies on security sends producers scurrying for cover. I have also heard more prosaic explanations. The man ignited himself on a Sunday and in general weekend shifts are the bane of lower level staff that tend to play it safe.

Apparently, NHK also has strict protocols regarding reports on suicides, attempted suicides and mental illness that reflect concerns about privacy. But I have noticed that there is fairly extensive reporting on suicides, including the self-immolations committed by Tibetans against the tyrants in Beijing. The only other case of self-immolation I have seen covered by NHK is the fruit vendor in Tunisia who set himself on fire and ignited the Jasmine revolution. Since the act of self-immolation is associated with the weapons of the weak against despotism, covering this political act against Abe might prove embarrassing to the government and risky to career prospects.

Overall, insiders at NHK say that under Abe it is not business as usual. There is fear of retribution that stifles journalistic integrity. Recall that back in 2001 NHK showed Abe a documentary about the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal that held Emperor Showa responsible for the comfort women system. When Abe voiced objections, the show was

edited at the last minute, omitting the guilty verdict and adding commentary by a rightwing historian who said the comfort women were prostitutes and there was no abduction of sex slaves. Such examples of deferential journalism are not the stuff of Pulitzers.

It is worth noting, however, that NHK is not monolithic and that there are critical reports on many aspects of Abe's agenda. For example, on July 3rd Kuniya Hiroko interviewed Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshide on Close-Up Gendai, her NHK in-depth news program that follows the NHK 7 pm news. While she is not as ruthless as journalists are on BBC's Hard Talk, by Japanese standards Kuniya plays hardball. After running a clip that was critical of Abe's reinterpretation of Article Nine, Kuniya pressed Suga to answer questions he was evading and asked him to elaborate on vague answers. She also interrupted him several times to clarify key points and keep him from wandering off topic.

To her credit, Kuniya pointedly asked about the ethics of unilaterally reinterpreting the Constitution and expressed concern about Japan getting dragged into other people's wars. Suga defended Abe, saying that CSD was necessary because 1.5 million Japanese live overseas and another 18 million travel abroad every year. Hmm...that's the best he could come up with? As is common in Japan, Close-Up Gendai sent Suga an outline of its planned questions beforehand so it was not as if he was caught by surprise. Shukan Kin'yobi (July 11th) reported on the aftermath of the program, asserting that NHK is beholden to the Abe Administration. Apparently the prime minister's office angrily complained to NHK about the rough handling and demanded an apology. According to the report, NHK ended up apologizing, but NHK disavows the article.

Taking a break from writing this introduction on August 5, 2014 I watched the NHK news at 7 pm, Japan's most widely viewed news program. The lead story was about the suicide of Sasai Toshiki, a top scientist who was implicated in the falsification of research results about stem cells by Obakata Haruko, a junior researcher under his supervision. This scandal involved retraction of their co-authored article from the British science journal Nature, an embarrassing setback for both scientists. Sakai, a high profile scientist, lent his prestige and credibility to the paper, facilitating its publication without verifying the lab results. His suicide is a tragedy and newsworthy, like the Shinjuku self-immolation, but one wonders where and how NHK draws the line. The second news item was about a mentally disturbed teenage girl who murdered her friend and then began dissecting her, a story that featured extensive reporting on her personal family details and the various missed warnings about her violent inclinations.



Sasai Toshiki addresses a news conference in April

Then there was a segment about how prefectural chapters of the LDP are worried that Abe's reinterpretation of Article Nine will spell doom in next spring's local elections.

Apparently local chapter heads are very skeptical about Abe's initiative and complained that they had not been properly informed about the benefits of CSD and why Abe had bulldozed ahead without consulting them or the public. NHK showed Abe explaining CSD to these party elders and afterwards interviewed some of them. As it turns out, Abe's explanation did not clarify the situation and the prefectural party heads left the meeting complaining that they still could not understand why CSD is necessary and voiced concerns that Abe's initiative will drag Japan into war. Then there was a segment on the new defense white paper released that day focusing on the regional threats faced by Japan that underscores the need for CSD.

While I won't argue that August 5, 2014 was a watershed in NHK news coverage, it does illustrate that the suicide/mental illness taboo is not ironclad and involves a judgment call. The self-immolation case highlighted a politically sensitive issue that probably made the producer decide it was not worth angering his boss by embarrassing Abe. Scientist Sakai's suicide is very different. This high flyer was brought low by an underling's mistakes seeking to atone for and expunge the shame while leaving a suicide note exhorting Ms. Obakata to restore their honor by verifying her discovery and proving critics wrong. We also learned that he had been treated for depression. So the human-interest angle and search for vindication and honor trumped protocols about privacy, mental illness and concerns about copycat suicides. But what to make of the embarrassing revelations that Abe could not even convince party stalwarts about the logic of CSD or allay their concerns that it will pull Japan into war at Washington's behest?

So in the space of thirty minutes there were reports featuring a suicide/mental illness,

invasion of privacy (in this case a minor's) and an embarrassing political encounter for Abe, trampling on the trifecta of NHK taboos that have been invoked to explain no reporting on the self-immolation case. Sakai's gesture might be seen as honorable while the murder/dismemberment story shows a penchant for sensationalism. The fact that clueless LDP silverbacks left a meeting with Abe still clueless is not exactly breaking news. And the report on the new defense white paper helped soften the blow because it made the case for CSD. One suspects that prefectural understanding of CSD will soon be achieved after Abe announces a major pork barrel extravaganza under the banner of rural revitalization.

There is reason for wooing the base. Abe has tried to convince the public that his constitutional reinterpretation is necessary and will safeguard peace, but he has convinced no one who did not already agree with him. This explains why in August 2014, the polls show that 84% of the public feel that Abe has not explained sufficiently the necessity of reinterpreting the constitution and 60% oppose Japan exercising the right of self-defense. The public is worried that Abe is frog marching the nation rightward—the state secrets legislation, visiting Yasukuni Shrine, orchestrating a Diet hit-and-run on the 1993 Kono Statement on comfort women, lifting the self-imposed ban on arms exports, pushing nuclear reactor restarts and now CSD—in defiance of majority public opposition on all of these issues.

The two articles translated from the Japanese press help explain the media's minimalist coverage of the self-immolation. Shukan Kin'yobi reporter Asano Ken'ichi says NHK refused to comment on its non-coverage. He notes that suicides of public figures and those due to school bullying are regularly reported.

He also expresses despair about the press conference held on July 1st in which reporters did not press Abe to go beyond his boilerplate comments, implying they are more like stenographers than journalists, more lapdog than watchdog. Asano further explains NHK's non-coverage in terms of currying favor, but points out that social media allowed people to bypass mainstream media gatekeepers as videos of the incident went viral. Asano also dismisses the significance of the World Health Organization's suicide protocol discouraging reporting on suicides, pointing out that this rightly did not stop extensive international reporting about the self-immolation because it was directly linked to one of the most crucial political questions facing Japan.

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A Desperate Appeal Made Into a Crime by the Media: The attempted self-immolation in Shinjuku

Asano Kenichi

Translated by Kenji Hasegawa

Just past 2pm on June 29, near the south exit of Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, a man made a speech opposing Japan's exercise of collective self-

defense and attempted suicide. Media coverage of the incident has been remarkably scant. As Iwamoto Taro pointed out in the July 4 issue, all the major newspapers relegated the incident to short articles in the society section. In contrast, the overseas press widely reported the incident as a protest against Prime Minister Abe. Footage of the incident [with audio] can be accessed on the internet.

Kyodo News released its article at 5:54pm—a strikingly slow reaction in this age of the news flash. In addition, there was a tendency to portray the man as a criminal as in the following Kyodo News report of July 2: “The [Shinjuku branch of the] Metropolitan Police is investigating the man who attempted the self-immolation on a misdemeanor charge (abuse of flammables).” In its July 8 article Tokyo Shinbun provided further information: “The man who attempted suicide was 63 years old, without employment and from Sakura ward of Saitama city....According to eyewitnesses, the man stated ‘I loved the Japan that has been peaceful for 70 years. With collective self-defense, Japan will be ruined.’ He recited a portion of Yosano Akiko’s poem, “Please do not die [Kimi shini tamaukoto nakare],” dedicated to the poet’s younger brother who was sent to fight in the Russo-Japanese War.” “He sent a letter to TV stations announcing his intent.”

The July 19 issue of Shukan Gendai reported that it had obtained the letter the man had sent to TV stations shortly before the incident in which he wrote, “After stating my firm opposition to the cabinet decision and the unpardonably reckless misgovernment of the Abe administration, I will express my protest through self-immolation. I strongly wish that you broadcast it live to the nation.” The article also introduced the man’s lifestyle and pointed out that, “while there is obviously debate over the appropriateness of ‘self-immolation’ as a

form of protest, it is unmistakable that his action has become a ‘small thorn’ for the Abe administration.”

Some see the media’s suppression of this incident as resulting from the WHO (World Health Organization)’s guideline on reporting suicides. However, the media has reported suicides if they were of a highly public nature, such as those of public figures or those that have resulted from hazing in schools.

In the aforementioned Tokyo Shinbun article, the diplomatic commentator Magosaki Ukeru criticizes NHK’s complete silence on the incident: “It cannot be helped if they are seen as currying favor with the Abe administration.” In response to viewer questions, NHK has reportedly explained its lack of reporting from the standpoint of political objectivity stipulated in the Broadcast Law.

I too sent a list of questions to NHK on the 11th: “Did your reporters cover the attempted self-immolation? If there was coverage of the incident that went unreported, why was that the case?” “This incident was announced to media in advance and contained a political message. In comparison to previous reporting on attempted and actual suicides, why was this one unreported?” NHK’s public relations answered on the 14th, “We did not report this incident. We do not answer questions concerning specific news decisions.”

On July 1, Prime Minister Abe emphasized that he would “protect to the end the Japanese people’s lives and peaceful livelihood.” In the question and answer session broadcast by NHK, a journalist from Hokkaido Shinbun, one

of the managing organizations of the prime minister's residence press club, asked about the possibility of future governments expanding the interpretation of collective self-defense given the vagueness of the cabinet decision. A second journalist from Fuji Television asked, incredibly, about the talks between Japan and North Korea. The AP journalist asked about the resolve that would be demanded of the Japanese people given the potential sacrifices. Abe read from his notes and did not provide substantive answers. I was filled with despair by the journalists who did not even attempt to press the prime minister who was trying to change the shape of the nation in coup d'état style.

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浅野健一 「命掛けた訴えを犯罪にしたメディア
新宿焼身自殺未遂」

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